Ghost Hunter's Guide to New Orleans

Chapter 1

How to Hunt for Ghosts

You may want to visit recognized haunted sites, listed in chapters 2 through 5, using some of the ghost-hunting techniques described later in this chapter. Or you may want to conduct your own spirit investigation. If that is the case, choose a place you think might be haunted, like an old house in your neighborhood or a favorite bed-and-breakfast inn. You may get a lead from fascinating stories about ancestors that have been passed down through your family.

Your search for a ghost, or exploration of a haunted place, starts with research. Summaries of obscure and esoteric material about possible haunted sites are available from museums, local historical societies, and bookstores. Brochures and booklets, sold at historical sites under the Louisiana State Park system, can be good resources, too.

Guided tours of historical sites, such as the Garden District, Jackson Square, old churches, or New Orleans' famous cemeteries, are good places to begin your research. Tours can help you develop a feel for places within a building where ghosts might be or an appreciation of relevant history. New Orleans ghost, cemetery, and vampire tours are very popular and offer a good way to learn a lot about local paranormal activity in a short time.

In addition, touring haunted buildings offers you an opportunity to speak with guides and docents who may be able to provide you with clues about the dearly departed or tell you ghost stories you can't find in published material. Docents may know people—old-timers in the area or amateur historians—who can give you additional information about a site, its former owners or residents, and its potential for ghostly activity.

Almost every city has a local historical society. (See Appendix G.) These are good places to find information that may not be published anywhere else, including histories of local families and buildings, information about tragedies, disasters, criminal activity, or legends and myths about places that may be haunted. Take notes about secret scandals or other ghost-producing happenings that occurred at locations now occupied by modern buildings, roads, or parks. In these cases, someone occupying a new house or other structure may be hearing strange sounds, feeling cold spots, or seeing ghosts or spirit remnants.

Newspapers are an excellent source of historical information as well. You can search for articles about ghosts, haunted places, or paranormal activity by accessing the newspaper's archives via the Internet and entering key words, dates, or names. Newspaper articles about suicides, murders, train wrecks, plane crashes, and paranormal phenomena can often provide essential information for your ghost hunt. Stories about authentic haunted sites are common around Halloween. Bookstores and libraries usually have special-interest sections with books on local history by local writers. A few inquiries may connect you with these local writers who may be able to help you focus your research.

If these living souls cannot help, try the dead. A visit to a local graveyard is always fruitful in identifying possible ghosts. Often you can find headstones that indicate the person entombed died of suicide, criminal activity, local disaster, or such. Some epitaphs may indicate if the deceased was survived by a spouse and children or died far from home.

Perhaps the best place to start a search for a ghost is within your own family. Oral histories can spark your interest in a particular ancestor, scandal, building, or site relevant to your family. Old photographs, death certificates, letters, wills, anniversary lists in family Bibles, and keepsakes can be great clues. Then you can visit gravesites and/or homes of your ancestors to check out the vibes as you mentally and emotionally empathize with specific aspects of your family's history.

Almost every family has a departed member who died at an early age, suffered hardships and emotional anguish, passed away suddenly due to an accident or natural disaster, or was labeled a skeleton in the family's closet. Once you have focused your research on a deceased

person, you need to determine if that person remains on this earthly plane as a ghost. Evaluate the individual's personal history to see if he had a reason to remain attached to a specific place.

Was his death violent or under tragic circumstances?
Did he die at a young age with unfinished business?
Did the deceased leave behind loved ones who needed his support and protection?
Was this person attached to a specific site or building?
Would the individual be inclined to seek revenge against those responsible for his death?
Would his devotion and sense of loyalty lead him to offer eternal companionship to loved ones?

Revenge, anger, refusal to recognize the reality of transformation by death, and other negative factors prompt many spirits to haunt places and people. However, most ghosts are motivated by positive factors. Spirits may remain at a site to offer protection to a loved one or a particular place.

Also, remember that ghosts can appear as animals or objects. Apparitions of ships, buildings, covered wagons, bridges, and roads by the strictest definitions, are phantoms. A phantom is the essence of a structure that no longer exists on the physical plane. Many people have seen houses, cottages, castles, villages, and large ships that were destroyed or sunk years before.

BASIC PREPARATION FOR GHOST HUNTING

If you decide to ghost hunt at night, or on a special anniversary, make a trip to the site a few days ahead of time. During daylight hours, familiarize yourself with the place and its surroundings. Many historical sites are closed after sunset or crowded at certain times by organized tours.

TWO BASIC METHODS FOR FINDING GHOSTS

Based partly on the kind of paranormal activity reported at a site, the ghost hunter must decide which method or approach will be used.

Some people feel competent with a collection of cameras, electromagnetic field detectors, digital thermometers, computers, data recorders, and other high-tech gadgets. These ghost hunters prefer to use the Technical Approach. Others may discover they have an emotional affinity for a particular historic location, experience a surprising fascination with an event associated with a haunting, or feel empathy for a deceased person. These ghost hunters may have success with the Psychic Approach. Another consideration is the ghost hunter's goal. Some desire scientific evidence of a ghost while others simply want to experience paranormal activity.

THE TECHNICAL APPROACH

Professional ghost hunters often use an array of detection and recording devices that cover a wide range of the electromagnetic spectrum. This approach is complicated, expensive, and requires technically skilled people to operate the devices. Amateur ghost hunters can get satisfying results with simple audio and video recording devices.

Equipment Preparation

A few days before your ghost hunt, purchase fresh film for your camera and tape for audio recording devices. Test your batteries and bring back-up batteries and power packs with you. You should have two types of flashlights: a broad-beam light for moving around a site and a penlight-type flashlight for narrow-field illumination while you make notes or adjust equipment. A candle is a good way to light the site that is least offensive to your ghost.

Still-Photography Techniques

Many photographic techniques that work well under normal conditions are inadequate for ghost hunts because they are usually conducted under conditions of low ambient light requiring long exposures. Some investigators use a strobe or flash device, but they can make the photos look unauthentic.

Practice taking photographs with films of various light sensitivities before you go on your ghost hunt. Standard photographic films of high light sensitivity should be used—ASA of 800 or higher is

recommended. At a dark or nearly dark location, mount the camera on a tripod. Try several exposure settings from one to 30 seconds and aperture settings under various low-light conditions.

Make notes about the camera settings that work best under various light conditions. Avoid aiming the camera at a scene where there is a bright light, such as a street lamp or exit sign over a doorway. These light sources may "overflow" throughout your photograph.

Some professional ghost hunters use infrared film. You should consult a professional photo lab technician about this type of film and its associated photographic techniques. Several amateur ghost hunters use Polaroid-type cameras with interesting results. The rapid film developing system used by these cameras gives almost instant feedback about your technique and/or success in documenting ghost activities. Ghosts have reportedly written messages on Polaroid film.

Many digital cameras have features that enable automatic exposures at specific intervals, such as once every minute. This allows a hands-off remote photograph to be made. Repetitive automatic exposures also allow a site to be investigated without the presence of the investigator.

Your equipment should include a stable, light-weight tripod. Hand-held cameras may produce poorly focused photographs when the exposure duration is greater that 1/60 second.

Audio Recording Techniques

Tape recorders provide an inexpensive way to obtain evidence of ghostly activity, particularly electronic voice phenomenon or EVP. Always test your recorder under conditions you expect to find at the investigation site to reduce audio artifact and insure optimal performance of the device. If your recorder picks up excessive background noise, this may obscure ghostly sounds. Consider upgrading the tape quality and use a microphone equipped with a wind guard. Use two or more recorders at different locations within the site. This allows you to verify sounds such as wind against a window and reduce the possibility of ambiguous recordings.

You can use sound-activated recorders at a site over night. They automatically switch on whenever a sound occurs above a minimum threshold. Be aware that each sound on the tape will start with an

annoying artifact, the result of a slow tape speed at the beginning of each recorded segment. The slow tape speed could obscure the sounds made by a ghost.

Remote microphones and monitor earphones allow you to remain some distance from the site and activate the recorder when ghostly sounds are heard. If this equipment is not available, use long-play tape (60-90 minutes), turn the recorder on, and let it run throughout your hunt, whether you remain stationary or walk about the site. This allows you to make audio notes rather than written notes. A headset with a microphone is especially useful with this technique.

Video Recording

Video recorders offer a wide variety of recording features from time lapse to auto start/stop, and auto focus. These features enable you to make surveillance-type recordings over many hours while you are off site. Consult your user's manual for low-light recording guidelines and always use a tripod and long-duration battery packs.

If you plan to attempt video recording, consider using two recorders, at equal distances from a specific object such as a chair. Arrange the recorders at different angles, preferably 90 degrees from each other.

Another approach you might try is to use a wide-angle setting on the first camera to get a broad view of a room, porch, or courtyard, and on the second camera, use a close-up setting to capture ghostly apparitions at a door, chair, or window.

You may have more success with sequential, manual, or timer-actuated tape runs than a continuous-record technique. If you try this technique, use tape runs of one to five minutes. Practice with the method that interrupts the automatic setting should you need to manually control the recording process. Always use a tripod that can be moved to a new location in a hurry.

High-Tech Equipment

Night-vision goggles can be useful in low-light situations. You can see doors and other objects move that you might not otherwise see. These goggles are quite expensive, however. You can also buy devices such as electromagnetic field detectors, infrared thermometers,

barometers, and motion detectors at your local electronics store or over the Internet. A good source for high-tech ghost-hunting equipment is www.technica.com. Electronic gadgets can be useful and fun, but unless you have a means of recording the output, your reports of anomalies, movement, and apparitions will not be the kind of hard evidence you need to satisfy skeptics.

Other Equipment

Various authorities in the field of ghost hunting suggest the following items to help you mark sites, detect paranormal phenomena, and collect evidence of ghostly activity:

White or colored chalk
Compass
Stopwatch
Steel tape measure
Magnifying glass
First-aid kit
Thermometer
Metal detector
Graph paper for diagrams
Small mirror
Small bell
Plastic bags for collecting evidence
Matches
Tape for sealing doors
String
A cross
A Bible
Mobile phone

THE PSYCHIC APPROACH

The Psychic Approach relies upon your intuition, inner vision, or emotional connection with a deceased person, an object, a place, or a point of time in history. You don't have to be a trained psychic to use this approach. All of us have some capacity to tap into unseen dimensions.

People who feel the peculiar atmosphere of a distant time or

believe they can perceive a voice, sound, image, touch, or texture of another dimension may have psychic abilities that will pay off in a ghost hunt. The Psychic Approach does require an ability to eliminate external and internal distractions and focus your perceptions. If you use this approach, three factors may increase your chances of experiencing ghostly activity.

The first factor is the strength of the emotional imprint or attachment the deceased has for a particular place. The frequency, duration, and consistency of the paranormal phenomena may indicate this. The strongest imprints are created by intense emotions such as fear, rage, jealously, revenge, or loss, especially if they were repetitive over long periods of time prior to death. Other emotions such as love for a person, a place, or an object may also create a strong imprint. Biographical research may reveal this kind of information, particularly if personal letters or diaries are examined. Old newspaper articles and photographs are useful, too.

The second factor is the degree of sensitivity the investigator has for environmental imprints. Knowledge of the key elements and historical context of the entity's death can increase your sensitivity. This includes architectural elements of a home, a theater, an airplane, a ship, furniture, clothing, weapons, or any implement or artifact of the specific time period. Touching or handling these artifacts, or standing within the historic site, enables ghost hunters to get in touch with the historical moment of the ghost's imprint. A high degree of sensitivity for a past era often generates an odd feeling of being transported through time.

The third factor is sensitivity to or empathy for the ghost's lingering presence at a haunted site. A ghost may be trapped, confused, or choose to remain at a site to protect someone or guard something precious. Sensitivity for the ghost's predicament can be increased through knowledge of the entity's personal history such as emotions, motivations, problems, or unfinished business at the time of death. Research of historical sources like newspapers, old photographs, or books can provide this kind of information. Useful, intimate details might be found in letters, suicide notes, diaries, and wills.

Your sensitivity to ghostly environmental imprints and spirit manifestations may be increased by meditation. This is a simple process

of relaxing your physical body to eliminate distracting thoughts and tensions and achieve emotional focus. Meditation allows you to focus your spiritual awareness on a single subject: a place, an entity, or a historic moment in time. As the subject comes into focus, you can add information obtained from your research. Markers of time or seasons, artifacts or implements, furniture, and doorways are a few suggestions. By doing this, you become aware of unseen dimensions of the world around you that create a feeling that you have moved through time to a distant era. This process gets you in touch with the place, date, and time pertinent to a ghost's imprint or death. It also enables you to disregard personal concerns and distracting thoughts that may interfere with your concentration on the ghost you seek.

Keep in mind that it is possible to be in a meditative state while appearing quite normal. The process is simple and easy to learn. When you arrive at the site of your ghost hunt, find a place a short distance away to meditate. Three essentials for any effective meditation are comfort, quiet, and concentration.

Comfort: Sit or stand in a relaxed position. Take free and even breaths at a slow rate. Do not alter your breathing pattern so much that you feel short of breath, winded, or lightheaded. Close your eyes, if that enhances your comfort, or focus on a candle, tree, or flower. Do not fall asleep. Proper meditation creates relaxation without decreasing alertness.

Quiet: Meditate in a place away from noises generated by traffic, passersby, radios, slammed doors, and the like. If you are with a group, give each other sufficient personal space. Some people use mantras, repetitive words or phrases, or speak only in their mind in order to facilitate inner calmness. Mantras are useful to induce a focused state of relaxation, but they may disrupt the meditation of a companion if spoken aloud. A majority of ghost hunters do not believe that mantras are necessary in this instance. They point out that ghost hunting is not like a séance as depicted in old movies. It is not necessary to chant special words, call out to the dead, or invite an appearance "from beyond the grave."

Concentration: First, clear your mind of everyday thoughts, worries, and concerns. This is the most difficult part of the process. Many people don't want to let go of their stressful thoughts. To help you let

go of those thoughts, let the thought turn off its light and fade into darkness. After you clear your mind, some thoughts may reappear. Repeat the process. Slowly turn off the light of each thought until you can rest with a completely cleared mind. This might take some practice. Don't wait until you are on the scene of a ghost hunt before you practice this exercise.

Once your mind is clear, focus on your breathing and imagine your entire being as a single point of energy driving the breathing process. Then, open yourself, thinking only of the entity you seek. Starting with the ghost's identity (if known), slowly expand your focus to include its personal history, the historical era of the ghost's death or creation of the emotional imprint, the reported nature and appearance of the haunting, and any specific ghostly activity.

Acknowledge each thought as you continue relaxed breathing. Find a thought that is most attractive to you, and then expand your mind to include your present surroundings. Return slowly to your current place and time. Remain quiet for a minute or two before you resume communication with your companions, then move ahead with the ghost hunt.

GROUP ORGANIZATION AND PREPARATION

It is not necessary to be a believer in spirits or paranormal phenomena in order to see a ghost or experience haunting activities. Indeed, most reports of ghost activities are made by unsuspecting people who never gave the matter much thought. But you should not include people in your group with openly negative attitudes about these things. If you include skeptics, be sure they maintain an open mind and are willing to participate in a positive group attitude.

Keep your group small, limited to four members if possible. Ghosts have been seen by large groups of people but small groups are more easily managed and likely to be of one mind in terms of objectives and methods.

Meet an hour or more prior to starting the ghost hunt at a location away from the site. Review the history of the ghost you seek and the previous reports of ghost activity at the site. Discuss the group's expectations based on known or suspected ghostly activity or specific

research goals. Review possible audio and visual apparitions based on the history of paranormal activity at the site, telekinesis, local temperature changes, and intended methods of identifying or recording these phenomena. Most important, agree to a plan of action if a sighting is made by any member of the group.

The first priority for a ghost hunter is to maintain visual or auditory contact without a lot of activity such as making notes. Without breaking contact, do the following:

- activate recording devices
- redirect audio, video, or photographic equipment to focus on the ghost
- move yourself to the most advantageous position for listening or viewing the ghostly activity
- attract the attention of group members with a code word, hand signal (touch the top of your head), or any action that signals other hunters so they can pick up your focus of attention

Only attempt to interact with a ghost if it invites you to speak or move. Often, ghost hunters' movement or noise frightens a ghost or interferes with the perception of the apparition.

SEARCHING FOR GHOSTS

There are no strict rules or guidelines for successful ghost hunting except to be patient. Professional ghost hunters sometimes wait several days, weeks, or even months before achieving contact with a ghost. Others have observed full-body apparitions when they least expected them, while concentrating fully on some other activity. Regardless of the depth of your research or preparation, you need to be patient. A serious ghost hunter should anticipate that several trips to a haunted site may be required before some sign of ghostly activity is observed.

If you hunt with a group, you need to establish a communications system in the event that even one member might sight a ghost or experiences some evidence of ghostly activity. Of course, confirmation by a second person is important in establishing validity and credibility. In the previous section, a hand signal (hand to the top of the

head) was recommended as a means of informing others that they should direct their eyes and ears to a site indicated by the person in contact with a ghost. Because of this, all ghost hunters need to keep their companions in sight at all times and be aware of hand signals.

An audio signal can often reduce the need for monitoring other ghost hunters for hand signals. Equally important for a group is to establish a method for calling other hunters who may be some distance away. Tugging on a length of string can be an effective signal, as can beeping devices, mechanical "crickets," and flashing penlight signals, such as one flash for a cold spot and two flashes for an apparition. Hand-held radios, or walkie-talkies, can also be effective. Some models can send an audio signal or activate flashing lights. Cell phones can be used but the electromagnetic activity may be uninviting to your ghost.

Remaining stationary within a room, gravesite, courtyard, or other confirmed location is often most productive. If a ghost is known to have a favorite chair, bed, or other place within a room, it will appear. Under these conditions, the patient ghost hunter may have a successful hunt.

If your ghost is not known to appear at a specific place within a room or an outdoor area, position yourself to gain the broadest view of the site. A corner of a room is optimal because it allows the ghost unobstructed motion about the place while avoiding the impression of a trap set by uninvited people who occupy its favorite space. If you are outdoors at a gravesite, for instance, position yourself at the base of a tree or in the shadows of a monument to conceal your presence while affording a view of your ghost's grave.

If your ghost is a mobile spirit, moving throughout a house, over a bridge, or about a courtyard or graveyard, you may have no choice but to move around the area. Search for a place where you sense a change in the thickness of the air, feel a cold spot, or detect a peculiar odor. If you are ghost hunting with others, it may be advantageous to station members of your group at various places in the ghost's haunting grounds and use a reliable system to alert others to spirit activity. Each member could then patrol a portion of the site. Radio or mobile-phone communications may be essential for this type of ghost hunt.

Once you are on site, the above-described meditation may help you focus and maintain empathy for your ghost. Investigate sounds, even common sounds, as the ghost attempts to communicate with you. Make mental notes of the room temperature, air movement, and the sensations of abrupt change in atmosphere as you move about the site. Changes in these factors may indicate the presence of a ghost. Pay attention to your own sensations or perceptions, such as the odd feeling that someone is watching you, standing close by, or touching you. Your ghost may be hunting you!

WHAT TO DO WITH A GHOST

On occasion, professional ghost hunters make contact with ghosts by entering a trance and establishing two-way communications. The ghost hunter's companions hear him or her speak, but the ghost's voice can only be heard by the trance communicator. Sylvia Browne's book *Adventures of a Psychic* describes several of these trance communication sessions. However, most ghost encounters are brief with little opportunity to engage the entity in conversation. A ghost may make gestures or acknowledge your presence through eye contact, a touch on the shoulder, sound, or a movement of an object. The ghost hunter must decide to follow the gestures or direction of a ghost or not.

Visitors to south Louisiana plantations and historic French Quarter buildings often feel the touch or tug of ghosts on their arms or shoulders. These ghosts may be trying to get living souls to notice them, move out of their way, or follow them to some important destination. A ghost at Destrehan Plantation, believed to be the pirate Jean Lafitte, points to locations in the kitchen where treasure may be hidden. Ghosts who wander the levees along the Mississippi sometimes wave to people driving the River Road, beckoning them to follow. People who are brave enough to stick their hands through the tiny, barred windows of the slave quarters behind Keuffers building on Chartres Street in the French Quarter may feel the hands of slave children who died 150 years ago during an epidemic. These poor souls may want you to pull them out or enter the dark rooms and rescue them.

At the former O'Flaherty's Irish Channel Pub on Toulouse Street,

the ghost of murderer Joseph Baptandiere has grabbed the forearms of ghost hunters, creating visible impressions. One visitor felt an invisible rope tighten around her neck that left red marks. In 1810, Baptandiere killed himself by tying a rope around his neck and dropping out of a third floor window above O'Flaherty's pub.

To date, there are no reports of lasting ill effects by those who have been brave enough to follow these spirits or experienced contact with them. Residents of haunted houses and employees of haunted business establishments often accept ghosts' telekinetic or audio activities without concern. It is part of the charm of a place and may add some fun to working in a spooky building.

Experiences such as these are frightening to most of us. More often, the ghost's activities are directed at getting the intruder to leave a room, house, or gravesite. If you sense your ghost wants you to leave, most hunters believe it is best not to push your luck. When you have established the nature of the ghost activity, ascertained that your companions have experienced the activity, made a few photographs and run a few minutes of audio tape, it may be time to leave. An experience with an unfriendly ghost can be disturbing.

AFTER THE GHOST HUNT

Turn off all recorders and remove them to a safe place. Some ghost hunters suspect that ghosts can erase tapes. Label your tapes with the date, time, and location. Use a code number for each tape. Keep a separate record of where the tape was made, as well as the date, time, and contents. Place tapes in a waterproof bag with your name, address, telephone number, and a note that guarantees postage in case it is misplaced. Have photographic film developed at a professional color laboratory. Pros at the lab may help you with cropping and image enhancement. Have copies made of any negatives that contain ghostly images.

All members of the group should meet right after the hunt away from the site. Each hunter who witnessed ghostly activity or an apparition should make a written or audio statement describing the experience. The form, presented in Appendix A, is for the group leader to complete. Video and audio recordings made at the site

should be reviewed and reconciled with witness statements. Plans should be made for a follow-up visit in the near future to the site to confirm the apparition, its nature and form, and the impressions of the initial ghost hunt.

Data about the ghost's location within a site may indicate the optimal conditions for future contact. Things to be aware of include the time of day or night, phase of the moon, season, degree and size of cold spots, as well as form and density of the apparition. Patience and detailed records can help you to achieve the greatest reward for a ghost hunter—unmistakable proof of ghostly activity.